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ABSTRACT

In June 1993, revisions to the Pennsylvania School Code changed requirements for high school graduation from time spent in the classroom to mastery of 53 student learning outcomes. Districts were mandated to develop a strategic plan that included active community participation in implementing these new regulations. This study examined 17 districts in Southwestern Pennsylvania that were among the 175 Pennsylvania districts that were the first to implement this mandate to do strategic planning. Issues and problems that emerged centered around areas of communication and economics of the region. Communication problems were most apparent with regard to understanding the requirements of implementation and communication between the state department of education and the districts and between the districts and planning committees. Communication problems were also evident with respect to managing the process and special interest groups and personal agendas. The allocation of both financial and human resources was a second area of concern. An appendix contains a table of the major issues and problems in the planning effort. (Contains 1 appendix table and 48 references.) (SLD)

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PENNSYLVANIA EDUCATIONAL REFORM: ISSUES RELATED TO
STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

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**Pennsylvania Educational Reform: Issues Related to
Strategic Planning for Implementation of Student Learning Outcomes**

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In June 1993, revisions to the Pennsylvania School Code Chapter 5: Curriculum changed requirements for high school graduation from time spent in the classroom to mastery of fifty-three student learning outcomes. Districts were mandated to develop a strategic plan that included active community participation for implementing these new regulations. This study examined 17 districts in Southwestern Pennsylvania that were among the 175 districts in Pennsylvania that were the first to implement this mandate to do strategic planning. Issues and problems that emerged centered around areas of communication and economics of the region.

Pennsylvania Educational Reform: Issues Related to Strategic Planning for Implementation of Student Learning Outcomes

Interest in the complexity surrounding implementation of state educational policy at the local level has mushroomed since Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) spearheaded implementation theories and argued that consequences of even the best planned, best supported, and most promising policy initiatives depended on the stakeholders throughout the levels of the system that interpret and act on the initiative. In addition, they argued that separation of policy design from implementation is no better than mindless implementation with no sense of direction. Furthermore, the local response to the policy, they argued, will be complicated by such factors as culture, community involvement, interorganizational relations and institutional complexity.

In the commentary to follow, I add to the above noted literature by presenting a synopsis of a study done between 1994-1995 on the implementation of the 1993 educational reform in Pennsylvania regarding student learning outcomes as a high school graduation requirement. The new approach swung the state regulatory emphasis away from time spent in the classroom towards specific outcomes that students were to master before graduating. The concept of mastering student learning outcomes became a mass-media blitz called "Outcome Based Education." The criticisms against OBE were emotionally charged and well organized by opponents. Those that supported OBE were unable to defend it well. As districts prepared to plan for this initiative issues and problems arose.

Districts were permitted to alter their instructional practices, grading system, and assessments but were only mandated to make their changes through a strategic planning process that included diverse participation of community representation on the planning committees. Resistance dogged the process all the way because stakeholders and the public did not understand the concept of OBE and they did not understand strategic planning. In addition, clarity of the task due to ambiguities in the mandate as well as inconsistent expectations from the Pennsylvania Department of Education created varied opinions and perceptions among the stakeholders in the planning process that roadblocked progress. Furthermore, funding to support what appeared to be a transformational renaissance in education putting Pennsylvania on the cutting edge of education was a problem in most districts whether or not these districts were considered wealthy or not.

The study followed seventeen districts in southwestern Pennsylvania as they developed their strategic plan to meet the mandates found in the changes to the Pennsylvania School Code regarding graduation requirements. These districts were among the 175 of the 501 school districts in Pennsylvania who were grouped into the first phase for implementation. These districts were required to submit a strategic plan by September 30, 1994 for implementation of the plan with the in-coming freshman class of September 1995.

This synopsis discusses the purpose and approach to the study. Furthermore, the center of focus is on results related to communication and resources, two major findings in the list of issues and problems. Many lessons are to be learned but for the sake of this paper these two areas are highlighted. In addition, it frames the study in a literature base on implementation of educational policy theory and captures the lessons to be learned in implementing a state educational policy at the local level. Finally it addresses some of the implications for education in general.

Context for Involvement

Several circumstances that came together in 1993 led to a decision to look at what was happening in the school districts of Pennsylvania surrounding this reform effort. In June 1993, revisions to the Pennsylvania School Code Chapter 5: Curriculum changed requirements for high school graduation from time spent in the classroom to mastery of fifty-three state-designed student learning outcomes. Districts were mandated to develop a strategic plan that included active community participation for implementing these new regulations. The mandate required that each district develop its own version of education, while at the same time, implementing the regulations found in the new policy. This implementation would be done through a strategic planning process. This process was the tool used to design a district blueprint for change.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the problems and issues that emerged as the school districts in Pennsylvania tried to implement a strategic planning mandate for this new change that was controversial in nature and blitzed in the media and among the public as the "Outcome Based Education" controversy.

Tremendous issues had to be confronted by school districts as curriculum, assessment, and a vision for the district were planned in order to address the learning outcomes. Managing change involved linking the culture of the local districts with the political and philosophical systems embedded within the community.

At the same time, change meant coupling the expectations of the Pennsylvania Department of Education and compliancy issues of the mandate with the overall political and philosophical alignments found within the district. Members of various interest groups opposed to the new reform were engaged in discussion and debate with various politicians and local school administrators regarding what they perceived as morality issues surrounding this reform. Thus, negative feelings would ultimately influence the events at the planning table. This study addressed those fundamental challenges to the strategic planning process.

Implications of Theory

One could argue that change theory is the basis for debate in the study but as the study unfolded it became apparent that it was more a question surrounding implementation theory and not change. The stakeholders did not argue for or against change as much as they argued for or against implementing a policy that some found morally objectionable or professionally objectionable. So, implementing a policy that did not garner much public support was far different than trying to change something. They were also trying to implement the policy using a strategic planning method that few knew anything about. Strategic planning is a special process, not just a term that connotes long range planning. Trying to implement with a process that many were not skilled in, particularly not skilled in consensus building, was a difficult task. Therefore, it appears that implementation theory rather than a change theory really drives the research.

There are several perspectives of implementation grounded in literature that focused on implementation of educational state policy mandates at the local level: implementation as theory; implementation as process; and the nature of organizational behavior in implementation. The principles guiding these perspectives are noted in the following theories: Implementation of a state educational policy mandate is a complex chain of reciprocal interactions where each part of the chain must be built with the other part in view (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984); local capacity and will are two critical factors influencing successful or unsuccessful implementation which, in turn, influence knowing the rules of the game (McLaughlin, 1987; Furhman, Clune & Elmore, 1984); finally, stakeholders must have a shared vision of the change process and be able to reach consensus (Fullan, 1991).

Modes of Inquiry

This study examined 17 school districts in one county of southwestern Pennsylvania between 1994 and 1995 that were among the 175 districts in Pennsylvania that were the first to implement the new Chapter 5 Pennsylvania School Code change relating to the Curriculum calling for a strategic plan to implement fifty-three state-designed student learning outcomes as a high school graduation requirement. The State Department of Education [PDE] decided that the 501 districts in Pennsylvania would implement the changes to the school code in three phases. This was a less expensive and manageable way of handling it for the department and the districts were then broken down into three groups. The policy in the first group of districts would be implemented with the ninth grade class in September 1995.

There were 21 districts in this one county that were in the first group and all 21 were invited by letter to participate. Seventeen of the 21 agreed to be in the study by returning a "consent to participate" form.

This descriptive study included both qualitative and quantitative methods. *Descriptive* is defined here as a study grounded in matters related to the experiences occurring at the time of implementation and included data gathered from a variety of sources. Data collection consisted of interviews with 22 district administrators, 14 strategic planning steering committee members, three Pennsylvania Department of Education representatives and four informal conversations with external consultants involved in helping districts with the planning process. In addition, a survey was sent to 85 strategic planning steering committee members representing a sampling of five members from each of the districts. There was a 64% return rate. Observations were done at one strategic planning review training session held by the Pennsylvania Department of Education for those people who would review the strategic plans, eight strategic planning review sessions, and one area-wide consortium meeting of districts in this county that were in the first round. Documentation reviewed was 12 district strategic plans, four documents from the Pennsylvania Department of Education that were sent to districts to assist in developing the plans, and the Chapter 5: Curriculum Regulations. In addition, the Pennsylvania Educational Policy Studies database from the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh was used.

The database file provided information on variables that were pertinent to the picture of district demographics. It contained information from the 501 school districts in Pennsylvania provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the US Census. Variables found in the database are the defined

variables used by the Department of Education. Six variables were used to get a composite picture of each of the 17 districts in the study. These variables were: *aid ratio, total expenditure per pupil, average daily membership, number of professional persons, number of teachers, and pupils per teacher*. Socio-Economic Status (SES) was determined by grouping districts by aid ratio. The other variables were chosen because they provided a snapshot of the school district size and economic condition.

There were actually 17 interviews of administrators but in some cases there were two administrators in attendance. Twelve on-site interviews were held with administrators and five telephone. All fourteen strategic planning steering committee members were interviewed by telephone. They had agreed to be interviewed by noting that on the returned survey. One PDE person was interviewed by phone and the others were interviewed in-person. Thirteen of the on-site or in-person interviews were taped and results transcribed; one administrator did not wish to be taped and "rich notes" were taken and notes were taken with all telephone interviews. Notes were jotted with the informal conversations. Emerging themes and patterns were noted and coded as the data was analyzed.

Results of the quantitative parts of the survey were entered into a database file using dBase IV and analyzed using SPSSpc descriptive statistics. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions were coded and emerging themes and patterns were noted.

In the review and training processes issues and problems that continually emerged were noted. With documentation, each document was read and the process being advised was noted. The strategic plans were reviewed for structure and content.

Questions that were posited in the research process that resulted in findings that coded into communication and resources were:

1. What communication problems existed between the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the local school district or between the local district and the steering committee members?
2. How did district administrators and members of the strategic planning steering committee interpret the mandate to do strategic planning?
3. What impact did organizational capacity, district resources, and demographics have on the development of the plan?

4. How did philosophical and political differences among the strategic planning steering committee members influence the process of doing strategic planning?

Implications of Findings

Two areas predominated the problems and issues: communication and resources, particularly economic resources. As the data was analyzed issues and problems were determined and are noted in rank order in Table A1 in the Appendix.

The implementation of a reform effort that concentrated on mastery of student learning outcomes rather than time spent in the classroom as a graduation requirement in Pennsylvania was riddled with controversy and confusion from the moment that the regulations were first presented to the public in March 1992. This study presents the argument that as states consider revising their educational policies and expecting local school districts to comply, they should make sure that districts can meet the demands of the mandates. This includes insuring that all stakeholders involved in planning for implementation have the necessary training and resources to understand the expectations and meet the expectations. This was not necessarily the case with this reform in Pennsylvania. The major issues and problems centered around communication problems mainly lack of understanding of the mandate and clarity of the task, and resource issues both economic and personnel.

As the State Board of Education considered revising the Chapter 5: Curriculum regulations to the Pennsylvania School Code, they should have included more training programs in strategic planning and extensive training on Outcome Based Education and the merits of this system. Furthermore, they should have considered the economic and human resources needed to engage in a systemic reform of this magnitude. Major changes would be in curriculum to address the 53 outcomes, and assessment to measure mastery of the outcomes. With a lack of understanding about what strategic planning was all about and how to plan for an initiative like OBE that was riddled with controversy, the districts were left wide open for confusion and antagonisms.

Clear, consistent documentation was not forth coming from the state in trying to develop a strategic plan, consequently the state kept sending new information to the districts as the planning unfolded. The process had to stop and start and change directions after new pieces to the process came out over a year

and a half period of time. Some administrators felt they were losing credibility with the planning committee because new information would require new pieces to the process and administrators felt that the committees blamed them for this change in direction. Contradictory criteria was everywhere.

There is always going to be resistance to change, however, with a state initiative so riddled in controversy with anti-OBE sentiments, it was essential that districts be provided with some type of public relations information to present to their publics. Without adequate information and, least of all, conversion to the idea of OBE some district administrators were left dealing with angry stakeholders. This thwarted the process with endless debates and dialogues.

Districts should have had some security that there were adequate resources available to them to plan for a systemic change of this nature. Some stakeholders in the process felt that PDE abandoned them in this process. Some districts were in fiscal distress and had all they could do to remain viable on a day to day basis. Financially distressed districts, finding it difficult to embrace change because of financial uncertainty, tended to cling to status quo in planning. Districts in middle SES, having more resources to work with, tended to be more secure in planning yet tended to have more conservative interest group opposition to OBE that stalled the process with endless debates and dialogue. Wealthier districts, relying heavily on local taxes to support education, had a sense of obligation to continue programs their public demanded and tended to improve on what they had rather than change.

Lessons to be learned

The following list of "lesson to be learned" is not meant to be explicitly prescriptive. Rather, it is intended as a list of concerns which policymakers, their staffs, school administrators and all those interested in implementing educational policy at the local level can review while reflecting on implementing a policy. The lessons grew out of listening to and gathering information as to what was happening in the field around southwestern Pennsylvania during the implementation of the 1993 educational reform in Pennsylvania that was moving time spent in the classroom as a requirement for high school graduation to mastery of fifty-three state-designed student learning outcomes. They find their full rationale in the analyses of the information gathered.

Lesson One

Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) caution that when an initiative is characterized by contradictory criteria, antagonistic relationships among stakeholders and a high level of uncertainty about even a possibility of success, it is not hard to predict or to explain failure of the effort to reach its goals. The anti-OBE sentiment came up over and over as strategic planning committees tried to plan for an unpopular policy. Districts would often find themselves roadblocked or stalled during the planning process because of this sentiment from politically conservative interest groups and concerned citizens.

Lesson Two

Avoiding contradictory criteria is essential. The Pennsylvania Department of Education encouraged districts to start planning for this initiative in March 1992 when the idea became public before it became law in June 1993. Revisions to the planning mandate changed several times over the course of eighteen months. Many districts had started to plan in March 1992 thinking they were ahead of the game but were forced to stop and start the process as the student learning outcomes and related areas of the Chapter 5: Curriculum regulations to the school code continue to undergo revisions. Contradictory criteria on how to develop the plans continued to arrive on the desks of district administrators and each new document that came out was a little different from the one before. Some administrators felt they were losing credibility with their constituents in the planning process as each new explanatory document came out from PDE and changed the perspective. Some committees were blaming administrators for changing their minds on what to do when, in reality, it was a change in the process that was causing this. With the complexity of implementing a state policy initiative, the PDE should have provided clear consistent documentation right from the beginning and not keep sending new information to the districts as the planning unfolded.

Lesson Three

To avoid problems, McLaughlin (1987) argues that the first process of implementation is to learn the rules of the game. In this reform, little training had been given to the public and the administrators in strategic planning. Once the regulation became law, the anti-OBE sentiments were still "out there" and as district administrators tried to rally the community to become involved in the strategic planning process there were unresolved issues with the public regarding OBE. The PDE provided limited support for the educational perspective that was presented and left districts to face a sometimes angry steering committee with no resources to educate them on either strategic planning or OBE. Some steering committee members did not know their roles. In depth training in both strategic planning and OBE was needed. This lack of understanding led to lack of understanding the roles of the strategic planning steering committee, lack of understanding of where school boards fit into this planning process, and lack of understanding of how to engage the public in the planning process. A power struggle erupted in some districts between steering committees and school boards, and steering committees and administrators, or stakeholders and individuals in the district. With a lack of understanding about what strategic planning was and how to plan for an initiative like OBE that was riddled in controversy, the district administrators were often left wide open for confusion and antagonisms that thwarted the planning process.

Lesson Four

Fullan (1991) argues that stakeholders must have a shared vision of the change process and be able to reach consensus. Without training on the fundamentals of strategic planning or the relative merits of Outcome Based Education, the vision of the change process in some places became clouded and consensus was reached, as some stakeholders perceived, through a wearing down process where stronger voices in the community got their own way.

Lesson Five

Gallagher (1981) argues that planning must receive wholehearted support from those who are responsible for carrying out the policy. In some places, teachers, who had become cynical and skeptical over the years of one reform after another coming and going, were not eager to embrace another reform movement. Antagonisms emerged in some districts during the planning process as parents blamed teachers for appearing to lack enthusiasm for this reform effort. In some cases, teachers blamed administrators for a variety of issues ranging from contractual violations to playing favorites with the political lines of the community and various issues in-between.

Lesson Six

Dale (1989) argues that the transformation of the aims of the policy to expectations of the district are shaped not just by the immediate demands of the policy but the "tradition" of the district. The historical traditions of the communities generally moved from an area that was dominated by the steel industry for many years but most of the mills were now closed and the industrial model of education, whereby students were trained to meet the needs of local industry, was now changing. However, many stakeholders in the planning process still moved to the mentality of the school-to-work transition and they found planning for curriculum, assessment, and vision to meet the demands of the policy very difficult when the climate of the community was culturally conservative.

Lesson Seven

Lieberman and Griffin (1976) argue that lack of necessary resources to meet the demands of an initiative contributes to resistance. The low, middle, and high socio-economic districts all had unique problems that resisted change. Districts in the low socio-economic groups were usually the ones that had had the thriving steel mills that were now gone and there was no tax base from business to help support the schools. One district had gone bankrupt and others were close to it. They had traditionally educated students that were expected by the culture of the area to go to work in the mills in and around their communities. These districts tended to cling to status quo and lacked economic and human resources to change things. They depended heavily on state funding to support them and had laid off many teachers over the last ten years. Without radical conversion to the merits of OBE, without adequate training in strategic planning, without adequate resources to meet the demands of the reform, districts in these areas could not

embrace a transformational change away from the school-to-work tradition they had always embraced. Their planning, therefore, resisted change.

Districts in the middle SES areas found that even if they did not have the money now, they would plan anyway and worry about funds later. They did have adequate human resources to make some changes but the communities were growing with folks moving into these suburban type neighborhoods. These districts tended to have more vocal anti-OBE sentiments perhaps because of the diverse voices in these communities. The extensive dialogue opened by the diverse voices carried an array of anti-OBE sentiments and these stalled the process of planning with endless debates and dialogues. Personal agenda took over and, despite the voices, there was still a lack of understanding about the rules of the game and this lack of clarity caused a great deal of confusion and unrest.

Districts in the high socio-economic areas tended to have a tradition of sending approximately 90% of their graduates onto college. Due to plentiful economic and human resources, these districts could afford good programs. However, an inequity in school funding from the state forced these districts to rely heavily on tax payer dollars to support schools. This meant that a great deal of pressure was put on the planning process from those committee members paying taxes. There was little ability financially to do add-ons to the curriculum or make changes. For each change that was made something else had to change or go. The public often objected to this. Though these districts were considered wealthy they had a great deal of public pressure to have outstanding programs. Their planning process tended to focus on improving what they had rather than changing anything.

Lesson Eight

McLaughlin (1987) and Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) argue that the consequences of the best planned, best supported, and most promising policy initiatives depend on the stakeholders throughout the process that interpret and act on the policy initiatives. Some district administrators felt the structure of the strategic plans varied too much from district to district and that the state should have used one strategic planning format. When the mandate to do strategic planning came out, district administrators wanted to know what one LOOKED like. What WAS a strategic plan? Administrators wanted a sample plan to see what it looked like. Since nothing like this existed anywhere districts were forced to have outside consultants help develop a plan. The data showed that districts in the lower socio-economic group tended to call on the Tri-State Area School Study Council at the University of Pittsburgh; the middle used the Allegheny County Intermediate Unit #3 (a regional education center); and the high SES districts generally hired The Cambridge Management Group, a planning consulting firm. But this meant that planning throughout the state took on different avenues. As one administrator said, "...right now, we are not all applying common terminology and we should be. I mean, one district is saying one thing and another is saying something else. If we are going to do this, let's do it like it is suppose to be done!" Another said, "...At times, I believe we were TOTALLY in the dark--which took time and energy away from the actual process."

Implications for Theory and Practice

The potential value for this study is that policymakers and their staffs can use the results as benchmarks to determine the problems and issues so that they can be avoided or improved upon as the districts throughout Pennsylvania continue with the implementation over a three year period of time. Furthermore, district administrators can use the results as benchmarks to determine problems and issues that are outstanding throughout the process and perhaps generalizable to the districts throughout the state so that they do not feel alone in the difficulties and can lobby along with other districts for more resources to work this mandate out in order to implement the changes.

The information will add to the knowledge base of information related to implementation process of a state educational policy reform. It also grounds the theory of implementation and adds a fuller dimension to the study of implementation of a state educational policy at the local level by following something as it is happening rather than looking back four or five years later and wondering what happened. It goes beyond change theory as the stakeholders were more focused on how to implement a state policy that was riddled in controversy and confusion. They were also unfamiliar, as a rule, with the concept of strategic planning and how to do something called "strategic planning." For most stakeholders at the table, planning was planning, and they were unfamiliar with things like building visions and coming to consensus. They were caught up in endless debates and dialogues over philosophical and political differences and cultural mores and financial influences of the district that implementing a strategic planning process was an issue.

The study embraced five developmental concepts in state educational policy implementation at the local level: *communication; interpretation; difficulty of the task; capacity to respond; and interrelationships among the political and philosophical alignments*. It is one of the few studies done while a state policy initiative unfolded. Being in the trenches when the war is being waged has a far greater perspective on what is happening than "studying" about the war years later. Generally, studies of this nature were done three to five years after a policy was implemented. Expanding this knowledge base required the collection and analysis of different pieces of information but the information was collected as it was happening, and therefore, in my opinion, has a great amount of reality base and garners empathy for those in the trenches who were trying to implement this reform in the time they had to do it.

Appendix

Table A1: Two major areas of issues and problems

Major issues and problems in the planning effort	
Communication	Resources
1. Understanding the rules of the game <i>Problems between "PDE and the local districts</i> *curriculum mandate revisions *unsolved tension from OBE *ambiguities in the mandate *what a strategic plan looked like <i>Problems between the local districts and the planning committees</i> *expectations unclear *terminology vague	1. Financial *funding (reallocation of funding to pay for this) *district base (assessed what they could or could not do with what they had) *facilities to support changes *program availability
2. Management of the process *time *size and formation of the committee *resources to support the process (Financial realities could not match the reality of their dreams and the strategic plan in some places was a "shoot for the moon" plan that could not be a "living document" to work from in the future. Some districts referred to themselves as "lean and mean" with very few personnel and facilities to support programmatic changes to address curriculum that would have to change in order to address the 53 student learning outcomes.)	2. Human *attitudes among the stakeholders *personnel to do the work *community based (anti or pro support for schools)
3. Special interest groups and personal agendas (Curriculum, assessment, and vision were more highly influenced than any other issues.) Philosophical and political differences from the following groups created issues such as blocking progress, endless debates and dialogues, influencing unity of thought, length of time to complete tasks, researching decisions, building consensus, creating "camps" on the committee, and influencing a healthy climate in which to work. *Anti-OBE *Taxpayers *Teachers	
4. Availability of information	
5. Organizational issues	
6. Attitudes and relationships on the steering committee	

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